Tonight's combination of films is an odd and arbitrary one, but deliberately so. The hopes are that each film — a very good one in a specific category — will thus be seen and enjoyed by the audience coming for one or other film. Moreover, the films offer a span of nearly thirty years, and provide their own commentary on the cinema's progression from charming unsophistication to a kind of naturalistic realism neither wanted nor even totally possible on the silent screen.

"THE GREAT K AND A TRAIN ROBBERY" (Fox, 1926) Directed by Lewis Beiler
Scenario by John Stone from a story by Paul Leicester Ford; Camera, Dan Clark; 5 reels. Music arranged and played by Stuart Odenman
With: Tom Mix, Tony, Dorothy Dean, Ed Friel, William Welling, Carl Miller.

For years unavailable, the silent Tom Mix westerns for Fox have recently come to light, and tonight's film is both one of the best and most typical. Beautifully photographed by Dan Clark on location at the Colorado Gorge, it follows the Mix formula to a "T" - fast action, elaborately mounted stunts and a neat welding of rugged and realistic action with a decidedly non-realistic story in which the menace is never very threatening and nobody ever gets hurt let alone killed. The story is well under way already in the very first scene and the pace never lets up, although it frequently changes to a stress on comedy. Even though this is from Fox's most profitable Mix period, they wisely refused to be sidetracked into pretention and bigger "prestige" productions. It remains fast, economical and brief - giving the fans exactly what they wanted, making sure that every dollar spent shows up on the screen, but not wasting any of the budget on unnecessary frills.

The only complaint one can really direct at these Mix films - and it seems rather an unfair one - is that they all had such solid production values and kept the action going so consistently, that they rarely seemed to think it necessary to allow any lullaxes. The films just finish on the same even keel, a rather surprising lapse of showmanship, but not enough of a lapse to produce a sense of disappointment.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

"THE COMEDY MAN" (British Lion-Grayfilms Productions, 1963)
Directed by Alvin Rakoff; produced by Jon Pentington; screenplay by Peter Yeldham from the novel by Douglas Hayes; Production designer, John Blizard; Camera, Ken Hodges; Music, Bill McGuffie; 10 reels.

It seems both criminal and inexplicable (especially in view of its at least adequate star values, comedy content and substantial if tasteful sex-oriented situations) that a film of this stature should not be receiving the full exploitation in this country. It bears a vague parallel to Laurence Olivier's "The Entertainer", but while the Olivier film was a cruelly accurate study of a no-talent has-been (rather obviously and mercilessly patterned after Vic Oliver), "The Comedy Man" is richer, broader, warmer and more humorous. The actors here are not the has-beens or even second-raters, but rather the non-stars and those who have never made it, but to whom acting and the theatre is a religion and the only way of life possible. Anyone who is an actor - or who has known actors well - will recognize far more truth in this film than in the gesserish and more romanticalised American/Hollywood equivalents such as "Stage Struck" and "Stage Door", wherein stardom rather than acting is the goal. In another sense, the film makes an interesting comparison with Howard Hawks' "20th Century"; just as that presented a surprisingly realistic picture of the theatrical world by satirising its upper echelon of super-stars and producers, so does "The Comedy Man" present a realistic picture of the whole British show-biz world - the theatre, movies, TV, commercial - by focussing on exactly the other end of the scale. (Then) new director Alvin Rakoff is a little inconsistent in style, and like Richard Lester, tries a little of everything. Nevertheless, it remains: his best picture in a disappointing career which has never lived up to this early potential. Incidentally, in these days when so many movies start off with pre-credit "teaser" scenes (mainly designed as attention-getters when the films hit TV), it's worth noting that this film's pre-credit sequence works perfectly, and is one of the best and most legitimate uses of that now much over-worked device since it was introduced in 1939 in "Of Mice and Men".

--- Wm. K. Eversen ---